London Notebook

By Richard L. Thomas

DOCTORS MAY STRIKE

LONDON — For more than two years now the British Medical Association has been considering the medical practitioner's right to strike. It has not, of course, been put as crudely as that by the doctors themselves. What has been suggested is "notification of termination of contract" which involves six months' notice to the local medical executive. As things are any doctor who has contracted to provide service under the national health service may terminate his contract by giving six months' notice.

More than once the BMA has considered advising mass resignation of its members which would mean that at the end of six months most medical practitioners would have resigned and the national health service, as we know it here, would have collapsed. It was a potent weapon to hang over the head of any government.

The doctors themselves have been divided. Some are in favor of a medical service in which doctors would receive a salary for which they would have to treat X number of patients; but most favor the present per capita emoluments but want more per capita. At present a doctor receives the equivalent of approximately $3 for every patient on his roll. The per capita payment is made regardless of treatment provided. The doctor gets no more whether you consult him daily or not at all.

There are complications. Not unnaturally old people are not very popular with doctors. They make heavy demands and provide few rewards. There is not even the satisfaction of a remarkable recovery after prolonged and diligent treatment which is often more satisfying to a doctor than his $3 capitation fee. Old people by the nature of things rarely respond to treatment except in the sense that they may be relieved. As yet old age cannot be cured.

Many doctors believe that they should get additional payment for those requiring prolonged or permanent treatment, and that rural doctors without assistants who work excessively long hours should also get additional payment. The way this was to be achieved was by mass resignation to force the hand of the government.

The British Medical Association has recently spent $10,000 on an inquiry into the position of doctors in the national health service. They asked Sir Frank Newsome, a retired permanent head of the Home Office, to conduct the inquiry and his findings are not encouraging. He says that mass resignation is unthinkable and that should it happen a salaried service would take its place—the thought of which irritates most doctors more than the inadequacy of the capitation fee. Indeed its possibility would be a major deterrent to any plans for resignation.

Officially the report has not yet been published but it is likely to be and it will undoubtedly cause a major stir. Meanwhile the problems remain. Some doctors have 3,000 people on their roll, but from their income they have to pay a salary for assistants, provide for the upkeep of an office (and be liable to a fine if it is not up to standard) and be on call at all hours of the day or night. The patient complains that the doctor is not compelled to provide personal service. He may send a deputy regardless of the wishes of the patient. Doctors complain that it is unavoidable because they are overworked.

Today there is a surplus of doctors. The argument is that doctors with a large list of patients should transfer some to less popular doctors—but this would nullify the patient's choice of doctor. Broadly it is true that the best doctors are the most popular—and that the most diligent get the biggest list of patients.

But whatever the doctors' troubles it seems that the right to strike has been ruled out as an effective instrument of policy. Maybe traditional British compromise will get to work and find a way out.

Meanwhile, despite the attractions of free medical attention, an increasing number of patients are paying for consultations. It saves waiting and it is expected that paying patient will soon be allowed to have his prescriptions on the same basis as the national health service—15 cents for each item on the prescription. At present he has to pay the commercial price on the grounds that he must pay for everything or nothing.

NATIONALIZED MEDICINE is probably the least of our troubles.

Nationalized transport has come in for some direct action from the customers. London Transport have developed a charming habit of pitching customers out of a train wherever fancy takes it and regardless of where the train is supposed to be going. The worm has turned and just lately passengers have been staging sit-in strikes and refusing to budge. So far has bureaucracy gone that one stationmaster called the passengers "a lot of criminals" and fetched the police who regarded it more in the nature of a domestic dispute. There have been threats of prosecution but more significant, perhaps, is that passengers recently have succeeded in compelling the bureaucrats of London Transport to complete the journey the train is scheduled to make.

Behind the scenes I learned that what London Transport is trying to do is to keep its timetables in a condition approximating to the book. Thus if a train is running late they just turn it round regardless of the convenience of the passengers in it and keep the train waiting until it can pick up its proper timetable on the return journey. Union bureaucracy enters into it because the driver has got to have so much time off on each run but the passenger has hitherto been the unconsidered morsel. Now he has made himself felt. The last time passengers refused to budge the powers of bumbledom recanted and the train went on. The worm has turned effectively.

Other methods will have to be devised to deal with other industries. Our nationalized gas and electricity boards have taken recently to high-handed dictation on installations. A new tenant for a house may be used as an excuse to order the re-wiring of the house or the replacement of gas mains—not on the grounds of danger but because the installations are obsolete. Recently three cottages belonging to one landlord were sold to the tenants. The gas had been supplied by means of a main meter in one cottage and sub-meters in the other two cottages. The new owners were ordered to modernize their gas supply and to take a direct service from the main. The cost was over $100. And it was either that or have your gas cut off!

An electricity board demanded $800 for running a domestic supply for 500 yards and again it was a case of pay or go without. The nationalized post office which runs our telephones (broadly with efficiency) has now introduced a charge for transferring a telephone from one subscriber to another even when no work is involved beyond changing the nameplate for sending the account. The national coal board has virtually given up the ghost after a spate of price increases which only resulted in a big demand for oil and a reduction in the demand for coal.

Now the miners who only five years ago were being recruited with grandiloquent advertising to make "Mining your career" are now being told to look for other jobs.

The socialists with an election in the offing have soft-pedalled their general attitude towards nationalizing everything but they stick to their intention to nationalize the steel industry if the electors give them the chance. At the moment steel making is one of the most efficient organizations in the country and it is its magnitude which attracts the socialists. It would, in effect, give the government indirect control over almost every important manufacturing process in the country.

Steel controls construction, automobile manufacture, shipbuilding and most of the other big export industries. As one critic points out next to nationalization of the land the nationalization of steel would do most to give the government control of almost every important industry.

There would be more justification if other nationalized industries were efficient and economical. Experience has shown that they are not. Broadly the trouble with nationalization is that there are always too many administartors and too few practical operators.

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THE BEGINNING of January marked the return of real winter weather and with it the customary dislocation of transport and communications. Every winter we have stories of trains being delayed by frozen points, water towers being frozen so that steam locomotives could not take on fuel, highways jammed by snowdrifts and skidding trucks blocking main roads. Few winters pass without some careless car driver being frozen to death in a stalled car on some lonely moorland.

The authorities which could do something about it always argue that the English winter is too short to justify expensive precautions. Electrical heating of railway points, for example, would run into millions. Really efficient highway clearance with modern snowploughs would again involve immense capital expenditure—and no one has ever thought, over here, that on certain sections of roads snow tyres or chains should be made compulsory to save people from themselves.

I have met only one driver who in winter takes the precaution of putting a small oil heater and a can of kerosene in the trunk of his car so that it can be used inside the vehicle should it get snowbound and gas for the car heater gets low. This particular gentleman is a commercial traveller who goes into many remote areas and he once had the experience of finding a couple frozen to death in a stranded automobile. The same gentleman also carries a tin of biscuits and some canned meat and soup which, in emergency, he could heat on his oil stove.

The average Briton, however, complains about the winter but does very little about it. True enough the days on which there is appreciable danger of being snowed in on a highway probably average only a dozen or so in an average year, but it needs a ghastly experience to make some people take action.

Our nationalized post office is one of the most efficient in watching winter weather. There was a time when one of the first signs of winter was the cut in communications. Telegraph and telephone lines were broken by weight of snow, or poles demolished by skidding vehicles or insulators cracked by frost. These days this happens only to the remoter vehicles because more and more main routes of telephone communication have been put underground. The poles and wires which used to disfigure the roads of Britain are rapidly disappearing. Already they are the exception rather than the rule.

Unfortunately our national electricity authority refuses to learn from the post office. As the post office has taken down more and more of their wires the electricity commission has erected more and more pylons with their massive cables stretched between. They rely on the weight and strength to withstand storm damage but experience is not always helpful. Every winter sees big areas with power and light cut off through storm damage but the authorities always argue that to place high voltage cables underground would be much too expensive.

Add to the English winter the traditional defects of English plumbing, the lack of central heating and air conditioning, and its brief spell can be miserable. But things are changing. Central heating is becoming more general, architects are paying more attention to insulation of houses, and there has been a tremendous boost in domestic fuel-fired and gas-fired boilers. Maybe in another 50 years the stoic English will have comfortable winters. Meanwhile we console ourselves with the fact that this endurance creates the hardihood of the British race.

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